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WAC

Israel. Look at us! Agricultural worker tells her story

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Interview with Sheherezad Issa, agricultural laborer from Furidis (Sheherezad is also among the women who appear in the documentary “Look at Us” by Video 48)

Only 20% of the Arab women work. In agriculture thousands could find jobs but those are occupied by 26,000 foreign workers who work in super exploitative conditions. The result for Arab women is poverty, private and communal. Job placement, together with empowerment courses, can eliminate poverty and emancipate women. WAC-Ma'an, independent Trade Union has been helping Arab women find jobs in agriculture and organizing them for the past 7 years.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L273xH340/shech_250_b-d421e.jpg

I began working in agriculture because the family's financial situation was bad. My husband's salary was not enough for both bringing up the children and taking care of the house. He worked with an Arab subcontractor and earned minimum wage – NIS 3,500 per month. At first I worked in agriculture via an Arab labor contractor. I would work 12 hours on closed premises and earn NIS 150. He took advantage of me. When I spoke to the manager, it became clear the company was paying twice what I received – in other words, the contractor was making an enormous profit at my expense. That same day I quit work. And I wasn't the only one – on that day, the whole group of women quit. After a while, the contractor called and proposed that I return to work for higher wages, but I refused.

When I wanted to work, my mother was opposed but my husband and children supported me because we really needed the money. But in any case, in my family everyone knows that I take my own decisions.

After some time, my husband quit working with the Arab subcontractor and began working in organized work with a wage slip. I too wanted to work in a place like that. In the meantime, I found work at the Afarsemor packing house through a manpower contractor, and there I met women working via the Workers Advice Center (WAC-Ma'an). I saw that they were earning more or less the same as me, but I paid a lot for transport which they did not. But what caught my attention was that I saw a WAC representative, Wafa Tiara, coming to visit them, to talk with them, help them solve problems, and asked them what they needed or if anything was lacking. At my manpower company, they would just throw us onto the premises and leave. It made me begin feeling I wanted to join WAC. I asked the other women whether I should, and they strongly recommended it, and thus I became a member of WAC.

Working through WAC is different from working via a manpower contractor. With WAC, I receive all my rights and I know what I get per hour. With WAC, nobody is employed “under the table” without wage slips, and everyone receives all fringe benefits including vacations. As members we pay a small fee as dues.

A wage slip is proof that the workplace is properly organized. No matter where you work, if you don't have a wage slip the state does not recognize you as a worker. If you have a work accident and you work without a wage slip, you're left with nothing. I received my first wage slip when I began working with WAC. I didn't care about the money – I liked the wage slip itself, because it showed the exact sum I was supposed to receive and detailed my rights. The wage slip showed that nobody was taking advantage of me.

I got married when I was young. I want my girls to study, and if they work, it won't be just any work, and never via a contractor. And not just my girls – it's important that everyone gets the benefits he is entitled to.

At present I don't work, after working six months with WAC. The season came to an end and we went home. The

contractor called and offered me work, but I refused, even though he has work while at the moment WAC has nothing to offer. I am not willing to let them take advantage of me. I don't want to support him or that system of employment. I want him to understand that there is a problem, that workers are not willing to accept exploitation, and perhaps that way he'll give the workers what they should get.

I took part in WAC's International Women's Day march. I would like to make a difference, I would like the state to sort out regular positions for us so we won't have to rely on the contractors. I send other women to WAC, and encourage all to take part in the march on International Women's Day and International Labor Day (May 1). I want us all to get our rights, and I want all women to be employed. I took part in the march because I want to be heard. I felt there were things in me that I was unable to express, so I express them on this day – places of work do exist, but we are unable to access them. When you march in a march like that, you feel like something is being set loose. I felt that we were strong, united, that we were with WAC which had organized people around the country. Women from various towns, from the Wadi Ara region, Jewish women and Ethiopian women marched with us.

19.10.11

Post-scriptum :



http://www.wac-maan.org.il/en/article_225